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Response to Gamel

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Response

Fiona Carruthers

I. Introduction

In her paper, Professor Gamel questions whether Western literary judgments about what its canon of literature should comprise could be broadened to include texts from a wider range of cultural traditions. The essay emphasizes how texts are used, including a critique of readings that posit too much authority with the text or suggest it can have only one meaning. Dr. Gamel argues that traditional approaches to literature, such as that of Harold Bloom, must be rethought. In place of the rather narrow, hierarchical implications the term "Western canon" carries, Dr. Gamel proposes Guillory's idea of an intercultural literacy as representative of our growing global culture. She suggests more relevant organizational metaphors for the canon, including a map, carnival, spectacle, and even a zoo. I wonder if Bloom would be so opposed to such an idea if he were offered the job of zookeeper. What's interesting about the organizational metaphors she chooses is that each one signifies the exotic, the out-of-the-ordinary, the larger than life. They also imply distance, travel, interaction, a sense of being in flux, surrounded by new and different states. Her discussion of intercultural literacy contains one crucial distinction: that of particularity versus universality. I take this to mean what is local, particular, or unique to a specific culture vs. what can be understood universally.

In my response, I would like to concentrate on the problems one encounters when trying to talk about a global culture. I aim to show why it is important to firmly locate literature in the civilizations from which it came. In order to do this, I would like to look at ways in which the Western canon functions, how it is portrayed in popular culture, and how multiculturalism is redefining the canon in both Australia and the United States.

II. The Western Canon

Before addressing these issues, I should offer what I understand by the term “Western canon.” The canon in itself is a concept open to interpretation, and critics have always held differing opinions as to what should be included in it. At its best, the canon is a collection of great works talking to and about Western civilization. You could argue that the canon has been used for other, more political and economic purposes—and perhaps still is — but this should not cancel out the merits of bringing together the best literature Western authors have produced. When examining the history of the canon and ways in which it has been used, it is important to annunciate its specificity and hence show why it is inappropriate to impose the Western canon in a universal sense.

Writers have always reacted against the canon, challenged its authority, rehashed and transformed literary history in their contemporary writings. Dr. Gamel mentions Kamau Brathwaite as an example of one author who sourced the Western canon as a sort of literary play, literally “using” the works to bring attention to his own. This example can also be used to show the canon as flexible and inclusive, rather than strictly rigid and exclusive. The experiences of women writers in the post-World War I period are comparable to Brathwaite’s style. Writers such as Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, and Katherine Mansfield also used puns and structural and thematic shifts to question the traditions and opinions that had largely kept their predecessors shut out of writing. In her essay “A Room of One’s Own,” delivered to a group of scholars at Cambridge University in 1928, Virginia Woolf imagines Shakespeare’s sister as a defeated would-be poet who killed herself in desperation. In her fiction and nonfiction, Woolf continually returns to the canon to both recall and rewrite literary history. Caught in a double bind, authors reject, source, and strive to secure a place in the canon all at the same time. In this sense, we can read the canon as open to criticism as much as it can seem a closed book.

This describes the issues faced by individual authors in relation to the existence of the concept of a Western canon. Many other groups — including critics, educators, even filmmakers —

also have a stake in defining the Western canon in terms of what it constitutes and the uses to which it can be put.

III. Dangerous Minds and Liberated Beings

The recent Hollywood release *Dangerous Minds* offers a rich duplicity of interpretations about literature and multiculturalism, and I would like to offer a brief content analysis. While mindful of the constraints of popular entertainment, I feel this film is important because it addresses issues of multiculturalism and literature and does so in a very uncritical framework. Popular culture is also the predominant global culture we share. Director John Smith's adaptation of a novel by LouAnne Johnson follows the experiences of a woman (played by Michelle Pfeiffer) who takes a job in Queens, New York, teaching literature. Pfeiffer's class is one of the most difficult in the school and is composed almost entirely of African- and Hispanic Americans. But what does she teach them? Bob Dylan and Dylan Thomas. Not exactly an ethnically diverse reading list. In her role as teacher and mentor, Pfeiffer continually tells the teenagers that if they can unlock the meanings of these texts and use them in a comparative fashion, then they can escape the cycle of poverty and violence, and even go to a university. The subtext is painfully clear. In order to survive in modern-day America, this group of ethnically diverse children has to master the Western classics. These are presented as the texts that can turn dangerous minds into liberated beings. According to the film, the canon has a transferable economic value. Dr. Gamel argues that critics such as Bloom are opposed to broadening the Western canon on the grounds of aesthetic taste and literary judgment, but a film such as *Dangerous Minds* would suggest that the stakes are much higher than that. The canon is a crucial component of the Western education system in this film and, it is fair to say, also in reality.

This would make complete sense in a homogenous Anglo-Saxon community. However, the fundamental issue is the film's portrayal of a multicultural classroom. In *Dangerous Minds*, there is little suggestion of parity for ethnic authors and artists. Rappers provide only the background soundtrack, and even rap is portrayed as yet another diversion from the serious classics.

The film details the multicultural experience: in this classroom is a complete plurality of races, backgrounds, interests, and knowledge. It is the teacher's task to somehow homogenize this group through culture, and eventually to bring them together as a class of good citizens.

This film highlights a common theme in the American media: what happens when the population becomes so diverse that the center begins to snap, and so-called basic values can no longer be agreed upon? In this context, what will be the role of traditional, centralizing forces such as the Western canon? The film's willingness to portray the infiltration of the teenagers' specific ethnic cultures into the classroom shows brilliantly the struggle Western literature faces as it comes face to face with the numerous components of global culture in classrooms, universities, cinemas, bookshelves, and even the streets.

IV. An Australian Perspective

We might ask how we see this struggle taking place in multicultural societies. From an Australian perspective, reading lists are more diverse in both universities and schools, more foreign literature is translated, and foreign films, particularly those by China's Zhang Yimou and Taiwan's Ang Lee, are having great success as mainstream events (not to mention winning at Cannes) rather than being billed as strictly foreign or high art films. In this sense, consumers are developing "global taste buds," whereby Australian audiences are ready to sample the best of other cultures rather than merely watching Western culture impose itself on the East.

To look at the flip side of the coin, an overriding impulse of immigrant communities is to preserve what is particular, what identifies them as a non-Western culture. Immigrant authors are most visibly carrying on this tradition: writers such as Ben Okri in London and Gabriel García Márquez in Paris. They write from the West about their traditional cultures and the problems they face. Their books, while culturally specific, win Western awards such as the Booker and the Nobel, respectively. These writers highlight the strong impulse of immigrants to celebrate both the individuality and the universality of their different civilizations. This double bind creates a tension when you try to

talk about a global culture. Literature defines and locates each civilization. We live in a time when people want more than ever to protect their cultural identity and heritage, regardless of where they choose to live. Under such circumstances, a global canon presents a sense of blandness and the dislocation of cultural and ethnic values and judgments. We must remember that literature, unlike the creative imagination, is a public commodity. Once published, it must jostle for a "place" at the local, national, and sometimes even global levels. Students of literature are constantly asked to compare and contrast. Books can be traded, banned, burned, censored, ridiculed, and expelled from curricula. The creative imagination functions more as a private, protected space for dreams, hopes, stories, gossip, and subversive thought. It cannot be removed from the individual or dislocated in quite the same way as a book can be. Canonicity has always been derived from definitions of cultural excellence. In this sense, talk of a global canon is almost a contradiction.

To sum up, I would like to bring together some of these themes by giving a potted history of the challenges Australia faces in the next decade. The Labor Government led by Prime Minister Paul Keating is committed to two main goals: making Australia a republic by the year 2000 and integrating Australia's economy with that of its Asian-Pacific Rim neighbors. This has led to confusion and cultural tension at home. On the one hand, Australians are busy working toward becoming a republic — conducting national opinion polls on the subject, holding competitions to redesign the flag, and even discussing new national anthems. Side by side with this sits a general acceptance in schools and universities that reading lists must be diversified to include African, Asian, East European, and other texts less widely distributed in the past. Australia, like the United States, has a large multicultural population. It also has an active Aboriginal population, which has put pressure on educators for decades to achieve more diversified curricula that pay homage to Aboriginal culture and literature. As the country redefines its nationhood, Australia is also attempting to integrate its economy with its Asian-Pacific Rim neighbors. Moves to promote two-way cultural traffic between Australia and its Asian neighbors have been fairly successful but have also increased tension and suspicion between the two continents. The Australian gov-

ernment is constantly forced to pose the economic integration question this way: How can Australia become part of Asia without becoming Asian? Such a mentality illustrates how difficult it is for cultures to embrace, and the constant fear of being swallowed up. When cultural links are made between Australia and Asia, sometimes they are inappropriate, ill-conceived, and based on ignorance.

A good example of this occurred about five years ago when our national network, the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), funded the creation of a new arm, Australia Television, to begin broadcasting into a handful of Asian countries. Unfortunately, not a lot of thought went into programming, and contributors to ABC immediately questioned the validity of beaming Australian comedy and drama into the region with subtitles. One of our best comedy acts, Roy and H. G. Nelson, who satirize the Australian way of life, now begin each of their ABC segments with the opening line "Hello, Asia. We know you're watching." I think this phrase sums up how difficult it is to make global connections. These comedians play on the fact their routine would mean next to nothing to most native Asians—it is simply too culturally specific; Roy and H. G. also realize that they know little about this vast, diverse entity we simply call Asia, hence the meaningless welcome "Hello, Asia."

V. Conclusion

The media has a crucial and expanding role to play in the success of our new "global village." But it is a challenge with which many editors, publishers, and broadcasters are still grappling. When asked by World Press Institute journalists about the future of international news, the executive editor of the Associated Press in New York said it was an unfortunate truism that people tended to prefer parochial news. However, his message was optimistic for an activity like the Roundtable. He said to us, "People don't care about international events or affairs. What will win them over is not more facts or deeper coverage, but wonderful writing. In journalism today, we need more brain power and diversity."

Dr. Gamel's essay asks for a form of sophisticated global cultural interchange. This is a complex and challenging road to

travel. In order to arrive at the desired destination, we need more people thinking about what we can offer each other in a real sense. We need a strong sense of where people are writing from; how their messages might be culturally coded, what their experiences can mean to us, and more quality in-depth coverage on cultural interchange from journalists. If we are wise enough to listen to the story of our neighbor and grant it equal importance with our own, then cultural interchange will serve its purpose.